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A

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

OF THE LATE

AMASA CONVERSE, D. D.

BY

REV. L. P. YANDELL

IN COMPLIANCE

PREPARED





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IN COMPLIANCE WITH THE REQUEST MADE BY THE PRESBYTERY OF
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DR. AMASA CONVERSE.

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.

At the meeting of the Presbytery of Louisville in this city, on the 8th of April, the undersigned was appointed a committee to prepare a sketch of the life of the Rev. Amasa Converse, D. D. The subjoined memoir has been written in obedience to that order:

The subject of this memoir was the oldest, but one or two, of the members of this Presbytery. He had been nearly half a century a minister of the gospel, and a conductor of a religious newspaper, and at the time of his death he was one of the oldest editors in our country. He lived in eventful times in the Presbyterian Church in the United States, and as editor was called upon to bear an active part in the stirring events. His influence was felt in the great crisis of 1837, and equally in that of 1861, which resulted in a second division of the Church. In both, his position was a trying one, but in both he acted with a firm moderation which, however it may have failed to satisfy the party passions of the time, has already, in the judgment of calm men, been justified by events. The record which he has left behind him is one that his family and Church will recur to with increasing satisfaction.

His Family and Early Life.

Amasa Converse was born in the township of Lyme, New Hampshire, on the 21st of August, 1795. His father, Joel Converse, was a native of Thompson, Connecticut, and the youngest son of Deacon Thomas Converse, of that place. According to records preserved in England, his family is of Norman descent. The original name was Coigneurs. His remote ancestors came

from Normandy to England about the time of the Norman conquest. The name was gradually Anglicised and abbreviated, and became Conyers. Subsequently it was changed to Converse, one branch of the family omitting the final e. Another is now represented by the Earl of Conyers, that branch having received the title of nobility not long after the Normans obtained control of England.

The ancestors of Dr. Converse came to America with the colony of Massachusetts Bay, about the year 1630, and their names are found in the records of some of the churches planted at that time, and also in the annals of the military expeditions of the colony against the hostile Indians. Edward Converse was a member of the First church of Charlestown, and Col. James Converse had command of the garrison at Woburn, Mass., and defended the infant settlements against the repeated assaults of savages.

The mother of Dr. Converse was named Elizabeth Bixby. She was a native of Woodstock, Conn., and was born in 1760, and died in 1850, at the advanced age of ninety years. Three of her brothers were revolutionary soldiers, and one of her sisters was still living in 1871, having lived over a hundred years. His father removed in 1788 to Lyme, where he was born, in a house which still remains in possession of one of the family. The memory of his parents continued precious to him to the end of his days. They were pious, godly people, who bore their children before the mercy seat in the closet and in the worship of the family.

Their example in all the relations of life was in harmony with their prayers, and gave force to the truths and sanctions of religion, which they endeavored to impress upon the minds of their children. His father died of pneumonia in the seventy-third year of his age.

The country into which his father had removed at the time of his birth was new; primeval forests covered the hills, from which the farmers must draw their subsistence. "The trees were to be felled, and in June the underbrush was to be cut down with a brush scythe, preparatory to burning the surface over during the dry weather in July and August. This was followed by the clearing of the land, piling up and burning the logs and large branches of trees which covered the ground, fitting it for the reception of seed for a crop of wheat. Here was work for boys and men, too." Such was his employment in the month of September; in the previous months of April, May and June, it was driving teams to plow the fields for corn, planting corn and potatoes, hoeing and gardening; and in July it was spreading the mown grass, raking the hay, and all the other labor required in carrying on a farm. He was put to work at the age of six or seven years, and before he was ten he persuaded his father to buy him a scythe, that he might help his older brothers in mowing. By such labors in summer, and by similar labors in winter in the woods, providing fuel for the fires, it was that his constitution was invigorated in early life, and endued with strength to bear the toils of student life in subsequent years.

He was not able to remember when or by whom he was taught his letters. The earliest lesson he could recall was at his mother's knee, reading and spelling words of four letters. At the age of four or five years he was sent to the common district school, taught by a man who had a stiff leg. To compensate for his lack of activity, the schoolmaster kept at his side a switch long enough to reach across the school-room, and ready to be brought down upon the head or shoulders of any unlucky urchin

who might be caught at play, or whispering to a school mate. "The discipline of these schools," remarks Dr. Converse, "was stern to a degree which I would by no means recommend." And yet he adds that he found the lessons required of him less of tasks than a sort of game, in which he often excelled his school-fellows. He was taken from the summer school when seven years old to work on the farm, and at twelve he was kept from school a part of the winter to bear his part in such labors as were required for the comfort of a farmer's family in that season. He loved the school, and in order to enjoy its privileges, sometimes rose and went to the work assigned him before day-light, that he might gain time to resume his studies in it at 9 o'clock.

Aspirations for a College Education.

In the days of his childhood, there was published in the village of Hanover, a newspaper called the *Dartmouth Gazette*, which had fifty two subscribers in his native town. To save postage, the subscribers went, once a year, by turns to Hanover for their papers, and brought them to a store in the village, whence they were distributed. At the age of ten or eleven, he persuaded his father to let him go to the college for the papers when his father's turn came to go or send for them. He was longing to see the college, described to him as a larger building than any in his native town, and especially to see how that mysterious art, printing, was performed. He was accordingly put upon horseback at the proper time, and started off to find his way to Hanover; and he described in his old age, how, as he saw a student walking across the college campus, he "coveted the privilege and honor enjoyed by him, not then imagining that it would ever be his own good fortune to be a member of the college."

He had now a genuine thirst for knowledge, and to meet its cravings was in the habit of borrowing all the books he could hear of, among which he seemed to remember with peculiar pleasure "Addison's Spectator." Sometimes, when thus absorbed in

reading, his father would say to him : "My son, you must lay aside your book ; we must go to work." Occasionally he spoke to his father of his earnest desire to be a scholar, but knew very well that his father was not able to defray his expenses at college from the products of a farm in that cold country, which required the labors of all his sons under the age of twenty-one to support his family, and keep the "wolf from the door," during the long, cold winter.

But at the age of sixteen or seventeen he formed a resolution to make an effort to obtain a classical education. He knew not where nor how to procure the funds necessary to accomplish his purpose. He had no rich friend to whom he might look for assistance. The wealth on which he expected to commence life, was a little more than a hundred dollars, which his father would be able to give him on his coming of age. But this would not defray his expenses at college a single year. A small tract of wild land, in the neighborhood of his father's, was offered for sale about this time, and he made an arrangement with his father for two years of his time, instead of the hundred dollars he was to receive, and purchased thirty acres of the land. In June, he entered with his scythe and axe, accompanied by a cousin who had joined him in the purchase, upon the work of clearing his farm. In July, the season for making hay, the young laborers hired themselves to the neighboring farmers to obtain money to pay their board and purchase seed wheat to sow upon their "field of promise." And so he took the first step towards entering college. The next step was to procure employment for the winter, and deeming himself "qualified to teach a good school," he went to the Rev. Nathaniel Lambert, his pastor, for testimonials to introduce him as a school-master to strangers. After a due examination as to his attainments in English grammar, arithmetic, penmanship, etc., Mr. Lambert gave him a certificate, commending him as entirely competent to fill the humble office to which he aspired. For this he paid him a fee of one silver dollar, and then rode

to Bradford, Vermont, distant about fifteen miles from Lyme, and engaged to teach a district school for three months, at twelve dollars a month and board. That sum was then considered a good price for the services of a teacher.

He was now nineteen years of age, and toiling on in the prosecution of his plan of becoming a scholar. At the close of his school in March, he commenced the study of Smith's Latin Grammar with a private teacher, and committed it to memory, (or such parts of it as pupils were then required to memorize) in ten days. He then went to Kimball Academy, at Meriden, and as he had studied only the grammar, the preceptor very injudiciously gave him his first lesson in Virgil, which he was to study out alone, so as to give a good translation at the hour of recitation. His knowledge of the grammar was, of course, very imperfect, and so his lesson, though only five or ten lines, was mastered with so much difficulty, that he was strongly tempted to throw aside the grammar and dictionary and return to the farm, and make the cultivation of the earth the business of his life. His pride, however, prevailed ; no difficulties must be permitted to turn him from his purpose. He rose early and applied himself earnestly to the task of making good sense of a few lines of the beautiful epic ; and in a few weeks he was able to translate the hexameters of the Mantuan bard with a good degree of facility. He was soon ahead of his townsmen, two young men who had commenced Virgil with him, and had the pleasure of proceeding alone, reciting daily as many lines of the *Æneid* as he could construe. In these exercises he continued some three months, his field of wheat growing in the meantime, and ripening for the reaper's sickle.

He returned to Lyme in July, pale and emaciated from want of proper exercise, and went to work with his brothers making hay, in order to secure their aid in harvesting his crop of wheat. This secured and disposed of, he went to Dartmouth College and resumed his classical studies. In

November he returned to the vocation of school-master, in which he spent three months, and then went to Phillips' Academy, in Andover, Mass. His account of the journey is interesting: "Early in April," he writes, "having sent forward a trunk containing my scanty wardrobe, I started for Andover on foot, in company with Isaac Grant and Joel Hasford, two young men about my own age, who were going to Boston as laborers. They had a horse to take to Boston, which we rode by turns, and tied at the side of the road to relieve one of the two foot travelers on their arrival. In this way we severally found relief from walking, and made our journey of a hundred miles in about three days."

He passed the winter profitably in this institution, deemed at that time one of the best preparatory schools in New England, when his funds being exhausted, he made known his situation to the Principal, Mr. Adams. This worthy man procured for him a scholarship, but said to him at the same time: "Converse do you go home, and don't you come back here until you look better than you do now." He thought as many others did, that the student was the victim of consumption, but the disease proved to be dyspepsia, brought on by too intense application to study. It was February, the thermometer was below zero, and the roads were filled with drifted snow. The journey home must be performed on foot; but it was the very remedy needed in his case, and after three weeks at home he was ready to return to the Academy, from which he went, the following August, to Dartmouth College.

In those days it was hardly considered proper for the son of a farmer, who had barely the means of a comfortable support, to aspire to the position of a college student. There had been only two or three such cases among all the young men reared in his native town. The son of a plain farmer in college seemed to be out of his place. Hence the colloquy between a maternal uncle, Jonathan Bixby and himself, to the following effect: "Well, Amasa,"

said his uncle, "I understand you are going to college." He replied, "I hope to go." And the uncle went on, "What are all you college-learned men going to do for a living? The farmers have to support them all. We have more lawyers than are needed already, and as many ministers as can be supported. How are all you learned men going to live?" He replied, "I am not at present concerned how they are to live. I want no bond from the farmers, obliging them to support me after I get through college."

Early Religious Impressions.

Of his early religious impressions, Dr. Converse has left the following interesting history:

"I was taught in my infancy to fear God and to offer to him a child's prayer on retiring to bed. The instructions of a pious mother were daily repeated in my early childhood; but for several years they seemed to make no permanent impression on my heart, which was alienated from God from my infancy. The exhortations of my father, and the hallowed lessons received from both my parents seemed to be lost upon me. I soon neglected the habit of prayer, and indulged the hope of the infidel, that the sanctions and doctrines of the Christian faith were a fiction. Yet I cannot say that parental piety and example were wholly without influence upon me. I recollect that in one instance my father, when sick, fainted and fell to the floor while praying with his family. I feared that he was soon to die, and retired to a secret place to offer prayer that God would spare his life. His health was restored, and the impression made by this incident was soon effaced or disregarded. I was required to read the scriptures, and also to commit the Shorter Catechism to memory. But I felt little or no interest in what I read in the Bible, and my lessons in the catechism were irksome tasks. Both were neglected and discarded before I was sixteen years old, and I was captivated and led into known sin by associates addicted to profane swearing, card-playing, Sabbath-breaking, &c."

About the time he was entering Phillips' Academy, he became acquainted with Mr. Asa Lord, of whom he speaks as "a plain man of superior understanding, whose Christian life commended religion to my attention more impressively than anything I had ever heard from the pulpit." It sug-

gested inquiry, "and inquiry led me," he writes, "to see that I was living like an atheist, without God and without a hope in the world." He became anxious and prayed much, seeking information in the religious experience of others, but apparently making little progress, "at one time tempted to renounce all belief in the doctrines of religion," and again "amazed that God did not instantly sink me in hell. Thus I continued," he writes, "for twelve months or more, thinking if I was rejected as a reprobate, I would perish pleading for mercy." He continues his narrative thus:

"One evening my fellow-students, thinking probably that I was truly a Christian, were looking for me to conduct our weekly prayer meeting, which was numerously attended; but I was not found till the services were commenced, and then was in the meeting, in the corner of a large school room, enjoying such a view of God, of his majesty and love as I had never had. I felt that if I were in hell, I would adore him and bless his name for his supreme excellence and glory. His perfections seemed inexpressibly lovely and glorious. The vision lasted perhaps an hour. I had then no hope that I was a converted man, or that my heart was changed. My ecstatic feelings were but for an hour or two, and then gradually subsided into the former state of doubt in regard to my spiritual state. But from that period I began to examine my feelings. I resolved to be a Christian—a resolution I had previously formed—though the world were in arms against me. I began to think that I loved God just as He was revealed in His Word; that I took delight in his service, and that I would preach his gospel, if not prevented by some insuperable obstacle. After a few weeks, I had a conference with Rev. Drs. Porter and Woods, and was received as a member of the Congregational church connected with the theological seminary in Andover."

College and Seminary Life.

He entered Dartmouth College in September, 1818, at the age of twenty-three, when that institution was involved in a law-suit, the decision of which has since been quoted as a precedent in so many similar cases; with which the name of Daniel Webster is indissolubly associated. The decision was in favor of the old Board of

Trustees, and so gratifying was the result to the Faculty of the College that it was announced to the country by the roar of artillery. While in college, young Converse devoted most of his time to the study of languages, which he preferred to that of mathematics. The winter vacations he spent teaching district schools, acquiring the means to continue his college course; but with this help added to his other slender resources, he could not have accomplished his purpose without a loan of eighty or a hundred dollars a year from the American Education Society. By rigid economy, availing himself of every occasion to improve his exchequer, and working hard all the time, he closed his collegiate course with honor, receiving his diploma the day on which he was twenty-seven years of age.

On quitting college, he resumed his work as a teacher, and reopened a select school in Chelsea; taking charge afterwards, of the Sanderson Academy at Ashfield, from which, at the close of the year, he went to Princeton to enter upon the study of theology. A few months after entering the seminary, his health failed him. In connection with his illness, he speaks with great feeling of the venerable Dr. Alexander, who "visited him and was very attentive to his wants during his sickness, and when he was able to ride, furnished him with his horse and carryall, in which he was accustomed to ride." He thought his physician drugged him too much with laudanum, and ventured to omit part of his prescriptions. For this, the doctor very naturally reprimanded him; but he replied that the opiate "made him stupid, and that if this was to be his last illness, he did not wish to go out of the world in a state of insensibility." The answer of the physician was one which he was not likely to forget: "Young man," said he, "by neglecting my prescriptions, you have put your life in peril; and what is of *more importance*, you have imperiled my reputation."

On recovering his health, he went to his friends in Ashfield, and renewed his theol-

ogical studies; and while there, at a meeting of the Franklin Association of Congregational ministers, was examined in reference to his qualifications for the ministry, and licensed to preach as a probationer. He returned, in November, to Princeton, with the view of prosecuting his studies; but Dr. Alexander, "who acted the part of a father to him, seeing how feeble he remained, advised him to seek a milder climate and go to work as a preacher, adding encouragingly, "You have learning enough to be engaged in your vocation."

Evangelistic Labors in Nottoway Co., Va.

He took the advice of his venerable friend, and went to Virginia. Arriving at his place of destination in Nottoway county, he made arrangements with Dr. Wm. J. Dupuy for board in his family, and the use of a horse, and opened a school, which grew upon his hands; rode much on horseback, and preached occasionally to a vacant church in the neighborhood. His health rapidly improved under his changed mode of life, and wishing to devote himself to the work of the ministry, after looking about sometime for a vacant church, accepted from the Young Men's Missionary Society of Richmond, the office of evangelist for the counties of Nottoway and Amelia. Here he entered zealously upon his work, and a few months later, at the request of a little church to which he preached, was ordained, by the Presbytery of Hanover, a minister of the gospel. Entering thus fully upon his mission, in the thirty-first year of his age, he was full of confidence in the power of truth, but with "little hope of being useful unless he could *compel* men to inquire for it, and make the great themes of revelation the subjects of earnest inquiry and thought."

Among those who early connected themselves with his little church in Nottoway, he speaks of Peter R. Bland, "a lawyer,

who, a few months after the profession of his faith in Christ, became a minister in the Presbyterian Church."*

Another prominent member of the bar became anxious concerning his spiritual state about the same time. He had "announced profanely, at a public dinner, that neither he nor his family would be taught by a Yankee." A few weeks later, he came to the young preacher, inquiring "what must I do to be saved?" and finally, was received into the church with his wife, bringing his children to be baptized.

Other instances of hopeful conversion were witnessed in the community, in the course of a few months, and the church was encouraged to hope for greater blessings. But there was no systematic arrangement in the church for the support of a Presbyterian pastor. Nothing of the sort had ever been attempted. The people were accustomed to listen to ministers, who proclaimed that "they did not preach for money." It was unpopular to attempt to raise a support for the family of a minister, and few would dare to circulate a subscription for that purpose. The roads being bad in winter, and most of the houses of worship in a dilapidated condition, a preacher during three or four months of the year, was restricted to a few churches.

He could see, therefore, no prospect of support, or permanent usefulness among this people, though he rejoiced in the evidences of progress in religion, which he had witnessed among them. For ten years he had been fighting the hard battle of life, toiling for bread in his preparation for college, and four years in college, and then in the theological seminary till health and strength broke down. He now wanted a permanent resting place, and a field where he might toil with the hope of doing good in the Lord's vineyard.

*This faithful servant of God removed, a few years later, to the neighborhood of Belmont, Tenn., and was received into the Presbytery of Memphis. After more than twenty years of pious labor, during which his house was the seat of an elegant hospitality, he was called to his rest, leaving a cherished name in all the churches to which he had ministered.

His Life-Work Commenced.

Such were the views he entertained near the close of the year 1826, when solicited to take charge of the editorial department of the *Family Visitor*, commenced in 1822, and the *Literary and Evangelical Magazine*, conducted heretofore by the late Rev. John Holt Rice, D. D. Thinking that he could accomplish more with his pen than he could as a preacher with a weak voice and impaired health, he was prepared to listen to the overtures made him.

After taking the best counsels he could obtain, with his fathers and brethren in the ministry, he made a contract with Mr. Nathan Pollard, the proprietor of both publications, on terms to give him an equal right in the editorial management of the publications; took an affectionate leave of his growing charge in Nottoway, and commenced his work as an editor about the 20th of February, 1827.

He was aware that the office was heavily in debt when he entered it, but he was not aware of the perplexing difficulties and labors to be endured in efforts to remove those debts. Many subscribers were delinquent in their payments; the patronage of the office was not sufficient to meet the current expenses of publication; and while the religious press was regarded as the *right arm for the Southern Church*, there was not enough strength to wield that arm with effect, or to remove the obstacles which paralyzed its influence.

He had heretofore had no experience in this kind of work, but he was learning very fast. He had been in the office but a few weeks when he saw, as he thought, that an earnest appeal should be made for the only religious paper then published in the Southern States, with an honest statement of its financial condition, to create an interest among its friends to relieve it from embarrassments which threatened its utter ruin. But his partner in the work would not have such a statement made to the public. He said it would ruin the credit of the office. After a few months he stated to Mr. P. that this connection with

the office as *Editor* must close; at the same time he offered him his services as a travelling agent to make collections for him. Mr. Pollard answered that if he left the editorial charge, he would discontinue the paper and close up the concern.

Dr. J. H. Rice was called for counsel in the business, who earnestly entreated him as a son in the gospel to continue in the charge of the papers. As the result of repeated conferences, he consented to purchase the publications. The sale of the publications to Mr. Converse was made on the first of July, 1828. He had then been connected with them one year and about five months. His loss by his partner's failure had been about twenty-five hundred dollars. He now engaged openly and earnestly in efforts to increase the circulation of the weekly paper, having transferred to it the subscribers to the magazine, the publication of which was suspended at the close of this year.

On the 16th of December, 1828, he married Miss Flavia Booth, in Brunswick, Virginia, a descendant of an old family of good repute from Massachusetts. He endowed his accomplished wife with his "worldly goods," which, as he expressed it, "were worth nothing." It is true he had about eleven hundred and fifty subscribers to a weekly journal, but they were "not half enough to meet the current expenses of its publication. Still, with such a wife for his companion, to counsel and encourage him, he adds, "the want of gold or silver could not make me either miserable or very poor." He redoubled his efforts to increase and extend the circulation of his paper, called the *VISITOR AND TELEGRAPH*, the *North Carolina Telegraph* having been united with the *Visitor* in 1827, and in three years he found his subscription list increased to more than three thousand. It now afforded him a competent support, with a prospect of becoming remunerative.

The Division of the Presbyterian Church.

"But at this period (in the words of Dr. Converse) the discussion of questions on

which the Church divided in 1741, was revived in the Northern churches, and many copies of a Northern paper, advocating the stricter views of what was called the Old School party, were circulated in the Southern Church. In this way, there was a check made to the growing success of my labors as an editor.

"It is proper to state in this connection, that there were diverse elements united by compromise in the Presbyterian Church in 1704 and 1705, when the first Presbytery was formed. There was the *old side* which adhered to the strict interpretation of the Westminster Confession; and the *new side* which claimed more liberty in the interpretation of the Westminster Standards. The new side became the majority about the year 1740, and a few years later founded Princeton College. These parties separated in 1741, and after seventeen years were again united.

"In 1831 and 1832 new issues had arisen. For many years the Presbyterian Church had aided the work of Foreign Missions in connection with the American Board, but as early as 1831 a Presbyterian Board was formed, and earnest efforts were made to carry on the work of missions both at home and abroad, under the direction of Presbyterian Boards.

"On one side it was contended that all the benevolent operations of the Church should be conducted by *ecclesiastical* boards formed by her judicatories; and on the other, it was maintained that education for the ministry and missions should be carried on by voluntary societies in connection with Congregationalists, as they had been for some twenty years, especially as both sides in our Church had united in forming plans of union with Congregational Associations.

"There were also questions connected with the doctrines of the atonement and the subject of slavery, on which the two parties in our Church were antagonistic to each other. Among such diverse elements in the Church, and so many conflicting opinions on topics of great interest and importance,

it is not surprising that there should be controversy, and that good men, in the heat of debate, in their zeal for what they conceived to be truth and right, should fall into error.

"The world has been admonished by the oldest controversy on record that the servants of God are tempted to sacrifice charity and lose their temper (as Job's friends did) in their zeal for truth; but the admonition does not appear to have been duly regarded in the Church."

He endeavored, up to the year 1837, he writes, to maintain a conservative, neutral ground; but such a course "was not satisfactory to zealous men on either side," and the excising act of the General Assembly that year, left, as he thought, no ground for neutrality. Four Synods, containing some five hundred ministers, and as many or more congregations, were cut off from the Presbyterian Church, without trial or citation to trial, the accusers being also judges in the case. Believing this to be in violation of the constitution of the Church, he took strong ground against it. The controversy that ensued in the religious newspapers was long and acrimonious, "editors refusing to exchange the common courtesies of life with brethren whom they once recognized as personal friends." Pastors from the pulpit exhorted their flocks against supporting a paper opposed to the "reform." Dr. Plumer, then preaching to one of the churches in Richmond, issued a prospectus for a new paper to defend the "reform measures." The war went on, and in its progress the subscription list of the TELEGRAPH was greatly changed, many old subscribers quitting it, and many new ones coming to its support. The paper was still self-sustaining, but it appeared advisable to the editor to accept a proposition from Philadelphia to unite with it a religious paper printed there, and issue it in that city. Accordingly, in January, 1839, he shipped his printing press and the furniture of his office to Philadelphia, and on the 9th of that month reached the city with his family. The united paper, the

TELEGRAPH AND OBSERVER, was soon issued, and its patronage steadily increased for a time.

The Anti-Slavery Agitation.

Mr. Converse now flattered himself with prospects of peace after the angry storm through which he had passed. But the prospect was delusive. The elements of another storm were gathering all along the horizon. Soon after settling in Philadelphia, the Rev. Albert Barnes called on him and informed him that he was writing a book on the subject of slavery, and the editor saw at once that he was destined to meet this question not only in the press and in private circles, but in all the judicatories of the Church. He attempted to dissuade Mr. Barnes from writing his book, telling him plainly that, in his opinion, no one was qualified to write on slavery who had not lived at least five years in a slave-holding community, but he got no thanks from the great commentator for his friendly advice.

The discussions on this subject in the Church, continued for many years, brought him in conflict with those whose fanatical views or feelings disposed them to disregard the teachings of the Bible, and who maintained that "if the Holy Scriptures sanctioned slavery, they could not be received as a revelation from God," that there was a higher law which they found in their speculations about the nature of things. Such was the reasoning of the late Albert Barnes on this question.

One side became fanatical and assumed the ground of *rational* infidelity (if infidelity ever can be called rational). But the war of words went on, on the ground assumed by the higher law party, till at length it kindled the fires of fanaticism in the General Assembly of the New School branch of the Church, where it prompted the majority to adopt measures in 1857 which excised the Southern Church no less effectually than was the excision made by the acts of 1837; and then in 1861 it burst upon the country like the pent up fires of a volcano, sweeping millions to un-

timely graves, before the tempest subsided and the country was restored to peace.

In reverting to these scenes, Dr. Converse recalled some personal incidents that may be of interest. This mania, rising and spreading on every side in the Church, gave him no prospect of peace in his position as an editor. As early, perhaps, as 1846 or 1847, he received a formal visit from several prominent ministers of Philadelphia, who sympathized with the Abolition party. They came for the purpose of persuading him to renounce the conservative principles he held, and change the character of the *CHRISTIAN OBSERVER*, and make it the supporter of their *moderate* anti-slavery opinions. "They had expected," they said, "when they requested him to take charge of their paper, that he would advocate their views and opinions." One of their number, the Rev. Dr. Phelps, read him a document pointing out what he and they conceived to be wrong in the character of the *OBSERVER*, and prescribing the course which it ought to maintain in the future. At the close of their fraternal criticisms and counsel, the Rev. Albert Barnes asked him in tones of harshness, which seemed to indicate displeasure, "Will you promise to conduct the *OBSERVER* in the future in accordance with our views?"

He replied in substance that as long as he conducted the paper, it would be devoted to the defence and diffusion of truth, and of the principles which the best interests of the Church required.

The brother who read the document containing the friendly remonstrance and counsels then asked, "Will you publish this letter for us in your paper?"

"Yes, if you desire its publication," he replied, "and I will answer it."

A copy of it was never furnished for publication.

Another incident of the same kind is narrated. In a brief notice of Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe's work, "Uncle Tom's Cabin," he mentioned some of the author's caricatures of the blacks and whites, and spoke of it as "one of the great hobbies of

1852." The remark gave offence to a brother minister (the Rev. Dr. Brainerd) who, meeting him at Presbytery a short time after, said to him by way of admonition, "If you speak of my friend, Mrs. Stowe, in this style, I shall have to call attention to the matter in some of the papers."

"Very well," he replied, "the columns of the CHRISTIAN OBSERVER are open to you."

A Disastrous Fire.

In the midst of this excitement, and while the anti-slavery party were endeavoring to supersede his paper, which they had failed to make the advocate of their cause, his publication office took fire, and was destroyed, with nearly all its contents. The cry of fire waked him from sleep about midnight, July 5th, 1854. Hastening with his oldest son to the place of the disaster, he reached the fire just in time to see the burning ruins of a block of twenty buildings, and to hear from policemen and firemen on the ground that nothing had been saved from his office. He 're turned to his residence, retired to his chamber and slept. At daylight," he adds, "I returned to the smouldering ruins, and was again told by the firemen that nothing had been saved from my office." This seemed to him very much like the beginning of financial ruin. He had left his ledger and books containing the accounts of thousands of subscribers on his desk, and his office was not insured. He relates that "as his children assembled that morning, having their Bibles to read at family worship, the sight of the Bible suggested the thought, and he remarked, 'If the fire has consumed all our worldly goods in the office, God has left us something better—ininitely greater riches in His Holy word.'"

An hour or two later in the day he was greatly relieved to learn that his books had been saved. A gentleman who was using a part of Mr. Converse's office at the time, as a matter of economy, seeing the building on fire, had burst open the door, entered the office full of smoke, and in the dark had fortunately laid his hands upon them, and

carried them to a place of safety. "To others, this incident," he remarks, "may seem too small a matter to be worthy of note; but I recognized in it the hand of God, enabling me to prosecute my work as an editor, and educate two of my sons who were pursuing their course of studies at college."

War of the Abolitionists Against the Observer.

He received letters of sympathy from many conservative men, but the radicals continued their war upon his paper, and his position as editor was a trying one. The unceasing efforts of the abolitionists to supplant the paper upon which the support of his family depended, brought to his mind the words of the prophet: "Take ye heed, every one, of his neighbor, and trust ye not in any brother; for every brother will utterly supplant, and every neighbor will walk with slander." A proposition was made to buy the OBSERVER; but the proposition was accompanied by a "promise," which sounded to him very much like a threat, that if he declined to sell, another paper would be started. A brother whom he greatly esteemed, (Dr. John C. Smith, of Washington City,) wrote him a letter full of kindly sentiments, earnestly exhorting him to yield to the wishes of this party, and warning him that, if he did not surrender to them the control of the religious press in Philadelphia, "*he was a ruined man.*" Nevertheless he declined the offer, for "it was repugnant to my manhood," he writes, "to accept an overture from Christian brethren who were holding a threat as a rod over my head, to punish me in case I refused their offer. And besides, I deemed that I was acting for thousands of patrons who, I had reason to believe, would not take such a paper as the leaders in the negotiation proposed to publish." To his friend, Dr. Smith, he wrote in reply to his friendly warning, that he was not contending with his brethren for gold or silver, but for something far more precious, and that if he was

a ruined man he would pray, with David, that "he might fall into the hands of the Lord, and not into the hands of men."

The promised rival in due time was started, and the two papers went on side by side for a number of years, the *OBSERVER* continuing to gain new subscribers, and afford support to the family of its proprietor. Meantime, the Kansas question mingled fresh materials with the elements of strife, kindling the smouldering embers of the abolition controversy into a flame. The election of Lincoln followed in 1860. It seemed impossible any longer to keep political discussions out of the church. While the Kansas struggle was going on, collections had been taken up on the Sabbath in some churches to aid immigrants going to that territory, and to purchase fire-arms to drive out settlers from the South. The crisis had at length come. The right of seceding from the Union, which had been claimed and threatened by a large convention of politicians at Hartford, Connecticut, during the war of 1812, was carried out by the South, in the winter of 1860-61. Dr. Converse, as a young man, had been of the party who affirmed the right of Secession in 1812, and he was ready to affirm it in Philadelphia in the maturity of his age, and in the face of threats of violence. At a meeting of some thirty clergymen for the discussion of the subject, he relates that he was "distinctly advised by one of the junior doctors present, that the publication of opinions affirming that right might cost him his life."

"Madness," he writes of these times, "ruled the hour. The parties had become hostile to each other, and in Philadelphia, it became dangerous to advocate the rights of the minority, and the doctrine of peace, in opposition to the majority."

"Self-constituted committees or spies were appointed to report the private conversations of their neighbors, if opposed to the views of the majority. The strife of words had proceeded too far to be settled by written constitutions, laws, compromise or arguments. The appeal was to the sword, the majority had become intolerant, religion and politics were strangely inter-

mingled in the partisan contentions of the day, and while these elements of strife were raging in the war of words, devices were perfidiously employed by Mr. Wm. H. Seward, Mr. Lincoln's Secretary of State, to provoke the forces of the seceded States to fire on Fort Sumpter, a Fort of the U. S., near Charleston, S. C., erected for the defence of that city, and thus initiated the civil war. The perfidious management of the Secretary succeeded. Fort Sumpter was obliged to surrender after a protracted bombardment, though not a man was killed on either side in the fight. The confederates had fired first, and captured a Fort of the U. S. That was enough to arouse the North to arms. The war clamor prevailed.

"The state of partisan feeling in Philadelphia, in the spring and summer of 1861, rendered it a very undesirable place of residence for an editor, who resolved to maintain his right and the liberty of the press. The cries for war against the South were mingled with the prayers of the Sanctuary, and the services of the Sabbath, and it was dangerous to publish facts, or advocate the principles of peace, and the sacred duties of religion, in the face of a community where the minds of the uneducated masses of the people were nearly all enlisted for the coming conflict, by the rousing cry 'to arms, to arms,' reiterated by leaders or those aspiring for popularity under the specious names of 'Liberty,' 'Free Soil,' and 'Patriotism.'

"The columns of the *CHRISTIAN OBSERVER* were repeatedly assailed by 'the war shriekers,' and efforts were made to torture the remarks of the editor into something which savored of treason. His life was threatened by some of the self styled patriots who had been roused to action.

"Not heeding such threats," he says, "for I did not believe myself in danger of violence, I quietly pursued my work, hoping that this storm of passion might subside. To many in the city I had been personally known for years, not only as an editor, but as a minister of the gospel of Christ, and had been repeatedly heard as a preacher in some twenty or more of their churches. I could not, therefore, think that my life was in peril among a civilized Christian people, though I entertained and expressed opinions opposed to the views of the majority on the absorbing question of the war."

At last, on the 22d of August, 1861, Mr. Seward "rang his little bell," and Dr. Converse was arrested. His paper was suppressed, his property seized, and the

earnings of a lifetime almost entirely swept away. The marshal who had orders to arrest him declared, it is said, that "a strange, unaccountable feeling came over him in the presence of the venerable servant of Christ," and though he knew that was he liable to a severe reprimand for disobeying orders, he declined to take him into custody.

The Closing Years of his Life.

Thus deprived of the means of providing for the wants of his family, and denied the right of expressing the convictions of his understanding and his conscience at the North, he turned his thoughts once more towards his old home in Virginia. He was successful in finding a path southward and by the middle of September, less than a month after his paper was suppressed in Philadelphia, the *CHRISTIAN OBSERVER* reappeared in Richmond. In that beleaguered city he labored during the war, writing, preaching, visiting the hospitals and prisons, conversing and praying with the sick, the wounded and the dying of both armies, accomplishing there, it may be, the greatest work of his long and useful life. With the close of the unhappy struggle, came another reverse in his pecuniary affairs. Like most of those around him, he found nearly all his earthly possessions gone, and at the age of three score years and ten, had to begin life again almost as poor as when he commenced it in the same place, a young man, forty years before. His printing office, however, escaped when Richmond was burned; and with a consciousness that he had suffered his losses in "liberty's defence," he "bated not a jot of heart or hope," but resolved to enter the field as a journalist once more; and so, without available means enough to defray the expenses of the office for a single week, before money had begun to circulate in the devastated city, "before mail routes were reopened or postoffices established, and before any other weekly paper in the Southern States" was started, he again issued the *CHRISTIAN OBSERVER*. The faith which had supported him in the midst of so many

other troubles, and which finally sustained him in a dying hour, rose with his increasing trials, and he felt assured that he should not want. He was inured to labor and to hardship, and the prospect of an old age of toil gave him no concern; but rather it was the fulfilment of a wish he had often expressed, that it might be his privilege to wear out in the service of his Master, and not be doomed to rust out.

In 1869, Mr. Logan, who had become editor of the *FREE CHRISTIAN COMMONWEALTH*, wrote to Dr. Converse, proposing to unite his paper with the *CHRISTIAN OBSERVER*; and an arrangement to that effect having been made, Dr. Converse removed to Louisville in August of that year, and commenced the publication of the paper under its present name of the *CHRISTIAN OBSERVER AND COMMONWEALTH*, in this city. He was then seventy-four years of age. His new home proved to be to him all that was promised. His enterprise prospered beyond his most sanguine expectations. In a few years he was able to pay off a debt of between eleven and twelve thousand dollars, by which it had become embarrassed in consequence of the war. Its subscription list continued to increase, and he had the satisfaction of seeing it, under his direction, grow to be the leading religious newspaper of the Southwestern States.

His children had grown up around him, and his sons were aiding him in conducting his paper. Three of them had become ordained ministers of the gospel, two were at the bar, and all, with their sister, were members of the Church. "His last days" one of his friends has remarked, "were his best days."

His old age was green and vigorous. The number of the *OBSERVER* which announced his death, contained several articles from his pen. His last effort was to write to an absent son. After finishing his letter, he took it to the postoffice to insure its going off by the early morning mail. The night was cold, and though the distance was short, he came home with a severe chill upon him, which proved to be a precursor of pneumo-

nia. After kneeling down with Mrs. Converse, as was his custom, and invoking the blessing of God on his Church, his country, and his family, he retired to bed greatly in disposed. He sank slowly, but steadily under his disease, and after an illness of less than four days, expired, as stated by a son who watched by his bedside, "without a murmur of complaint or repining, and without a single groan, so calmly and peacefully that it seemed like a child dropping into sweet slumber." He died at 10 o'clock, Monday morning, December 9, 1872, in the seventy-eighth year of his age. His last words were "I shall not want." The last article which he wrote for his paper was on "the Providence of God," and this he left unfinished. His last act was an act of prayer, and his last words, just quoted, were expressions of confidence in that Providence by which he felt that all his steps had been directed. His end was peace; and looking over the record of his life devoted to the service of the Master and the best interests of his fellowmen, we may with truth, exclaim:

"Servant of God, well done!
Rest from thy loved employ;
The battle fought, the victory won,
Enter thy Master's joy."

The Character of Dr. Converse.

The character of Dr. Converse is one upon which the mind dwells with eminent satisfaction. His industry, evinced early in life and continued down to the evening when he left his house for the last time; his perseverance in the face of difficulties, his

devotion to principle, his mingled moderation and firmness, his love of knowledge, are qualities which should be held up for imitation to the young men of our country, who, like him, are beginning life poor.

His Christian example was not less admirable. While the gentleness of his manner, his great courtesy, his respect for the opinions and feelings of others, gave the idea of a yielding temper, he had in his nature a firmness of purpose equal to any moral pressure that ever was brought to bear upon it.

He was eminently a man of faith and prayer, and devotion to duty. When Richmond fell, and the Confederate army was retreating, Sunday morning, one of his sons said to him that he meant to follow it. "No, my son," he replied, "not on the Sabbath day. Wait till morning, and then decide on the path of duty." In every event, it has been said of him, he saw the hand of God. Even when most pressed by business, he still found time to visit his closet, and regularly as the morning came round, spent a season there in secret communion with God, before going to the work of the day. And morning and night he called his family around him, each member with Bible in hand, each in turn reading a few verses, and all uniting with him in fervent entreaties at the throne of grace. The widow of this great and good man and six of the eight children born to them, survive. In his good name and godly example they have a legacy which is above riches.

L. P. YANDELL.

